



Saunders, J. (2012) 'Rebecca Saunders, Still' [programme notes]. In: BBC ed. *Dvorák, Rebecca Saunders, Tchaikovsky*. London: BBC: 6-8.

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PROGRAMME NOTES

Rebecca Saunders (born 1967)

Still (2011) *UK premiere*

Carolyn Widmann *violin*

'As if even in the dark eyes closed not enough and perhaps even more than ever necessary against that no such thing the further shelter of the hand. Leave it so all quite still or try listening to the sounds all quite still head in hand listening for a sound.'

The final words of Samuel Beckett's short story *Still* (1973) are one of many points of reference for Rebecca Saunders' violin concerto of the same name. In the story Beckett focuses on a single event, that of turning the head towards the setting sun as an unknown figure watches night fall, before placing the head slowly in hands, waiting for a sound. The links Saunders makes with the many meanings of 'still' emanate from this short text. As with much of her work, such definitions create resonances that permeate the music. She notes in particular the sense of unchanging, ongoing and exhausting insistence, whereby fragments create a single static image 'like a giant mobile seen from many perspectives, that in itself remains untouched'.

This reiteration is central to the first of the concerto's two parts. The short violin gesture that opens the work undergoes constant variation in the first half of the piece, testing its boundaries in an expanding halo of harmonics and glissandos. The restless insistence of this fragment, developed during her preparatory work with violinist Carolyn Widmann, represents another kind of stasis, that of 'the human body waiting, trembling'. This movement is set against a more static background that frames and colours the solo violin. The orchestra plays sustained sounds, overlaid with subtle pulsing and sudden stabbed interjections, or cascading in washes from which the violin emerges. The




Rebecca Saunders

Karin Schander

ensemble draws pitches from the violin's active gestures before transforming them through often violent changes of colour, continually altering the perspective to produce 'a manifest complex protraction of the one single thing'.

The title also refers to stillness – with its root in the German *Stille* – and the way silence is used to frame sound. For Saunders, silence is a starting point with 'an endless potential, waiting to be revealed and made audible'. She sees the act of composing as 'pulling gently on the fragile thread of sound, drawing it out from the depths of imagined silence; or, alternatively, sound erupting from the stasis of relative silence'. Such stillness is more apparent in the concerto's second part. The stark contrasts of the opening are replaced by a more veiled texture. Here the violin plays an extended, lyrical melodic line, coloured by



vestiges of the tremolos from the earlier music and surrounded by dense blocks of orchestral sound. The contour of the melody is greatly compressed, with microtonal inflections shaping its slow progression. The music repeatedly emerges from and returns to near silence, like a series of slow, elongated breaths, recalling the quietude of the protagonist in Beckett's text and its recurring 'quite still again'. As with Beckett's figure at sunset in the gathering darkness, Saunders' *Still* gradually fades into silence.

Still was co-commissioned by the Beethovenfest Bonn and BBC Radio 3, supported by the Ernst von Siemens Music Foundation. It is dedicated to Carolin Widmann and was first performed by her with Sylvain Cambreling and the BBC Symphony Orchestra in Bonn on 29 September 2011.

Programme note © James Saunders

James Saunders is a composer and performs in the duo Parkinson Saunders. He is Head of the Centre for Musical Research at Bath Spa University.

Composer Profile: Rebecca Saunders

The walls of Rebecca Saunders' Berlin studio are papered with a collage of sketches, a series of compact symbolic drawings defining precise musical events to be placed in forthcoming pieces. This working environment is a representation of the pieces themselves, with their isolated moments of concentrated activity emerging from a latent silence in the same way that the written fragments emerge from the white wall.

Her principal concern is with the intricacies of timbre, not perhaps a typically British preoccupation, and it is no surprise that Saunders has met with most success outside of the UK. Following her studies with Wolfgang Rihm at

the Musikhochschule Karlsruhe (1991–4), she returned to the University of Edinburgh to complete a PhD with Nigel Osborne (1994–7) before moving permanently to Berlin. Her ready acceptance by European audiences is underlined by the award of the Ernst von Siemens Förderpreis für Komposition, the ARD und BMW AG Musica Viva Prize and the GEMA Deutscher Musikautorenpreis, as well as performances at all the major continental festivals.

Saunders' music has at its heart a precarious balance between sound and silence, with each moment being 'sifted again and again, weighed against its surrounding framework of silence. It feels like a very physical process – sound as a material which one moulds in space and time.' While she is drawn instinctively to those sounds on the edge of silence, hers is not a quiet music: violent contrast often rends it apart. Crucially, her sounds are honed through careful experimentation with the instruments or their players while composing. This is evidenced by the numerous detailed text annotations which adorn the scores, tuning performers' actions with regards to subtle changes of bow speed, the balance between air and tone in a clarinet sound, or specifying the make of coffee can struck by a percussionist. Such precision is often set against the coarser articulation of mechanically produced sounds, like the nostalgic looping end-groove of a record in the dying resonance of *dichroic seventeen* (1998) or the phasing metronomes of *CRIMSON – Molly's Song I* (1995). It is timbre, not pitch, which is

"If you imagine that silence is saturated with sound, as a composer you gently pull this thread of sound out of silence."

Rebecca Saunders



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Piano Concerto No. 1

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Khatia Buniatishvili *piano*

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the principal carrier of line in Saunders' music, emphasised by her choice of titles, many of which make reference to colour or colour processes. More recently, she has explored spatialisation in *chroma* (2003–10), a series of compositions that installs small ensembles and sound source in the performance space.

Profile © James Saunders

Further Listening and Reading



Stirrings Still: musikFabrik
(Wergo WER6694-2)



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Interval: 20 minutes